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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001111

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KDEM SOCI SCUL TSPL TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: A WOULD-BE EDUCATION NGO FORCED TO OPERATE AS
A BUSINESS

¶1. (U) Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet distribution

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: On August 27, the Director of "Soltan Dag" Educational Center briefed Embassy Political Assistant on the activities and background of the organization. Soltan Dag provides foreign language and computer literacy courses to the public on a fee-paid basis. The organization gives discounts or free of charge training to orphans and children from disadvantaged families. Soltan Dag received a license for providing education from the Ministry of Education. It annually trains around 600 people and so far conducted over 20 training programs. It mainly operates on its own income, but would welcome international donor assistance to expand its training services. Soltan Dag has successfully implemented two grant programs funded by the U.S. Government. As is the case with other NGOs, Soltan Dag has no choice but to disguise itself as a business organization in order to survive in an environment that is unfriendly to NGOs. END SUMMARY.

TRAINING COURSES

¶3. (SBU) The founder and Director of Educational Center "Soltan Dag," Rejep Sultanov recently briefed Embassy Political Assistant about the organization's background and activities. Soltan Dag, founded in 2002 as a Private Individual Enterprise, provides foreign language and computer literacy courses for the public on a fee-paid basis. The Center specializes in English, Russian, Turkmen, French and German languages, while its computer courses include training on MS Office, Photoshop, Corel Draw, and Page Maker software and general internet skills. On average around 130 individuals (children and adults) attend the Center's courses. The figure declines to 50-60 in summer. The Center provides training in small groups of 6-8 persons, while other educational centers can not offer such small courses and still make a profit. The Center provides morning, afternoon and evening courses to make them convenient for its customers. The courses last from three to nine months. After completion of each three months of study, and subject to passing the language tests, students receive certificates of completion. Training costs from 70-80 denominated Turkmen Manats (approximately USD 25-28). According to Sultanov, the Center provides free of charge or discounted training to orphans and handicapped children attending the courses.

LICENSING ISSUE

¶ 14. (SBU) Soltan Dag is not registered as a public organization. In 2002 it received a three-year license to conduct educational activities from the Ministry of Education (MoE) and has renewed the license several times. According to Sultanov, the process of getting the MoE license was cumbersome, because first the Academy of Sciences (formerly Supreme Council on Science and Technology) had to give a recommendation to MoE, and only then MoE considered the application for the license. When asked his view of the process of renewing the license, Sultanov replied "It's Turkmenistan, nothing is simple here." Beginning in 2006, the Center provided secretarial training courses and obtained the necessary license for this type of activity.

GRANTS AND FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

¶ 15. (SBU) Soltan Dag received two grants from the U.S. Government for \$7,550 and \$3,423 to implement the Embassy's ACCESS micro-scholarship programs for teaching English to disadvantaged children (orphans, children from needy families) for a two-year period. The Center successfully completed one grant and is now implementing the second grant program. Within the framework of the program, the Center formed two groups, each consisting of 12 children, and taught them English not only in the Center's Ashgabat premises but also at a summer camp in Gokdere. Financially, Soltan Dag is a self-sufficient organization. Sultanov said that the payment the Center receives from its customers barely covers Soltan Dag's needs such as salaries to teachers, rent payment for premises, maintenance of computer and office equipment, and income tax

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payments. He commented saying "We make almost no profit. Even if the income is not much, I am happy as long as it covers basic expenses and enables us to teach more children."

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND STATISTICS

¶ 16. (SBU) The staff of Soltan Dag includes the Director, Deputy Director and a receptionist that work on a permanent basis, four contracted teachers, and volunteers, who are usually the Center's alumni. The language teachers are instructors from local universities and freelance teachers. From 2002 to present, Soltan Dag implemented over 20 training programs. According to Sultanov, annually the Center trains around 600-800 people, the figure includes both language and computer course students.

FUTURE PLANS

¶ 17. (SBU) When asked the Center's plans for the future, Sultanov said that in cooperation with the UK Embassy, his organization would like to teach computer skills to deaf and mute children. He had seen the new law on education and was happy to learn that it allowed for private schools. Sultanov is keenly interested in founding a private school that would teach foreign languages and computer skills. With the aim of learning about private schooling, he applied for a U.S. government-sponsored exchange program. He alleged that he did not qualify for the program "because some employees of the organization that administered the program in Ashgabat let their own acquaintances participate in the program." (NOTE: His allegation was likely sour grapes. The Community Connections program, administered by ACCELS, has a rigorous review process, including an interview panel with USAID participation. The selection process for the 2007 education program was highly competitive, with 58 applicants for 10 spots. END NOTE.) Also, Sultanov said he would like to organize a study trip to London for his best students but cannot afford to do so alone for financial reasons. In its activities, the Center cooperates with Agama Club, an NGO that specializes in sports. Together with Agama, they conduct rock climbing and excursion programs. When asked whether the organization, being an Individual Enterprise, pays taxes, Sultanov said they do, although he thought that "educational organizations should be given tax benefits. Yet to avoid problems with authorities we pay the full amount of income tax."

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: Many NGOs such as Soltan Dag have no choice but to become business organizations in order to survive in a tough climate for NGOs. The Turkmen government has shown no willingness to register new NGOs and allow them the legal benefits that registration would bring. Rather, government officials seem to think that government-run organizations are the best way to address social issues. END COMMENT.

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